

Early adolescents' encounter with beauty-is-good messages: Understanding the importance of appearance in youth's lives.

Jolien Trekels & Steven Eggermont

An ideal outward appearance is highly valued in Western society, as it has been shown to lead to positive outcomes in life, such as popularity and positive judgements from others (Langlois et al., 2000). The **media** appear to reinforce this association by portraying those who are in accordance with the appearance standards with various benefits, such as involvement in romantic relationships (e.g., Northup & Liebler, 2010). A three-wave panel study among early adolescents (i.e., 10- to 14-year-olds) was conducted in order to understand whether and to what extent adolescents buy into these messages and how it affects their well-being.

In a **first line of research**, we followed Crocker and Wolfe's (2001) argument that judgements of self-worth are informed by self-evaluations in those domains on which self-esteem is contingent. Contingencies of self-worth develop in response to social influences, such as the media and interactions with peers. Perceived adherence to self-standards in that domain (i.e., looking attractive) will, then, define the individual's perceptions of self-worth. In line with our expectations, results showed that early adolescents are more likely to believe that complying with appearance ideals is rewarded and normative if they more frequently encounter beauty-is-good messages, through both media and peer interactions. The belief that beauty is rewarded, in turn, increased early adolescents' tendency to equate their own self-worth with their outward appearance (i.e., endorsement of dysfunctional appearance beliefs).

In a **second line of research**, we found that magazine exposure is longitudinally related to the belief that fitting the appearance ideal is socially rewarded (through acceptance among peers) which is, in turn, positively related to social appearance anxiety. Such anxiety has been shown, in prior research, to negatively affect self-image and overall well-being (Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2011).

In a **final line of research**, we were interested to know whether a preoccupation with appearance (also called self-objectification; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) would increase adolescents' likelihood of engaging in appearance-focused behaviors. A new study was conducted among 12- to 18-year olds. It was found that appearance-focused Facebook use (i.e., appearance conversations with friends) was positively related to the internalization of rewarded beauty ideals which related to self-objectification. Self-objectification was, in turn, positively related to adolescents' engagement in behaviors to appear more sexy, such as applying make-up among girls and drinking muscle-enhancing beverages among boys. Nevertheless, the APA task force on the sexualization of girls and other scholars (e.g., Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016) have warned for the negative impact of taking on a sexualized appearance for adolescents' development.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the sexualization of girls*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Crocker, J., & Wolfe, C. T. (2001). Contingencies of self-worth. *Psychological Review*, 108, 593-623. doi: 10.1037/0033-295X.108.3.593
- Daniels, E. A., & Zurbriggen, E. L. (2016). The price of sexy : Viewers' perceptions of a sexualized versus nonsexualized Facebook profile photograph, *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 5, 2–14. doi: 10.1037/ppm0000048
- Langlois, J. H., Kalakanis, L., Rubenstein, A. J., Larson, A., Hallam, M., & Smoot, M. (2000). Maxims or myths of beauty? A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 390-423. doi: 10.1037//0033-2909.126.3.390
- Levinson, C. a, & Rodebaugh, T. L. (2011). Validation of the social appearance anxiety scale: factor, convergent, and divergent validity. *Assessment*, 18, 350–356. doi: 10.1177/1073191111404808
- Northup, T., & Liebler, C. M. (2010). The good, the bad, and the beautiful. *Journal of Children and Media*, 4, 265-282. doi: 10.1080/17482798.2010.496917